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ABSTRACT

Qualitative, in-depth interviews of resilient at-risk students were used to identify factors that these students believe contributed to their success in school. Resilient students in six urban, suburban, and rural school divisions in the Richmond (Virginia) area were nominated by principals and guidance counselors. Of the 115 identified, 62 were interviewed in individual sessions by 8 interviewers using a standard interview protocol. Findings from these interviews indicate that these students were busy with activities and other positive uses of time. They tended to have clear and specific long-term goals that they were confident of achieving, and they were optimistic about their futures. Many of the older students had experienced severe "reality checks" that turned them around. These resilient students had an internal sense of control about their lives and took personal responsibility for their actions. Most were from dysfunctional home environments, but did not find this a hindrance to school success. Most admired some adults they knew, and these relationships helped them believe in themselves. Implications for teaching and for the educational environment are discussed. Appendixes contain the interview protocol and a coded interview transcription. (Contains 40 references.) (SLD)

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ED 389 780

"DEFYING THE ODDS:

A Study of Resilient At-Risk Students"

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"DEFYING THE ODDS:

A Study of Resilient At-Risk Students"

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January, 1993

*The views expressed in MERC publications are those of individual authors and not necessarily those of the Consortium or its members.

Executive Summary

"Defying the Odds: A Study of Resilient At-Risk Students"

Despite substantial investments of resources the academic performance of at-risk students continues to be a major concern of educators. While much research has been conducted on the definition of "at-risk" and on the effectiveness of programs to help these students succeed, most research has been quantitative, with an emphasis on group achievement gains. The premise of this study was that much could be learned from at-risk students who have been academically successful. These students are called "resilient" at-risk students.

THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to use qualitative, in-depth interviews of resilient at-risk students to identify factors that these students believe have contributed to their success in school. The study also sought to identify implications for educators that are suggested from the findings.

The resilient students were identified by asking principals and guidance counselors in the six school divisions for nominations based on established at-risk indicators such as low socioeconomic status, being retained in grade, dysfunctional family, and drug abuse, as well as successful academic progress. Of the 115 resilient students nominated, 62 were interviewed in individual sessions that lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Eight interviewers used a standard interview protocol that asked students about hobbies and goals, school and teachers, home and neighborhood, and what has helped them succeed. Notes were taken for each interview; 43 interviews were tape recorded. The data were analyzed inductively to identify important themes.

FINDINGS

The findings from the interviews indicate that these students are busy with activities and other positive uses of time. They tend to have clear, specific, long term goals that they are confident of achieving. They are optimistic about the future. Many older students have had significant "reality checks" that have turned them around. These students have an internal sense of control about their lives and take personal responsibility for their actions. Younger students like school and "nice" teachers. Older students seem to

tolerate school, indicating that helpful teachers are ones who clearly care about them, are willing to listen without judging, provide support, and have high expectations. Even though most of these students are from dysfunctional home environments they did not find this a hinderance to school success. Most of the admired adults in these students lives were actual people whom they knew.

IMPLICATIONS

The results suggest that significant adult relationships and positive use of time help by providing encouragement, high expectations, recognition, accomplishment, and a support system when needed. These inputs lead to personal responsibility, optimism, a goal-orientation, and positive self-efficacy that in turn helps them to be resilient. The findings suggest that schools can help at-risk students by developing programs that foster protective mechanisms, such as self-esteem building and counseling services, by promoting internal attributions, by developing and maintaining a positive school climate with high expectations and staff who care about the students, by promoting greater involvement of students in school activities and clubs, and by improving teacher sensitivity to the need of at-risk students for positive adult relationships.

"DEFYING THE ODDS: A Study of Resilient At-Risk Students"

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Preface

This is the final report of a project sponsored by the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium. The Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC) is a collaborative research effort in central Virginia which involves Virginia Commonwealth University and six surrounding school districts: Chesterfield County, Colonial Heights City, Hanover County, Henrico County, Hopewell City, and Richmond City. The six districts represent a cross-section of urban, suburban, and rural public schools. One of the major purposes of MERC is to commission and support research studies that will have an impact on improving the quality of instruction in schools. This study was initiated in November, 1991, to provide information on programs and policies that can be implemented to improve the academic success of at-risk students. The project was directed by a research team that included representatives from each of the MERC public school systems and professors and a graduate assistant from Virginia Commonwealth University. This included the design and implementation of the study. The final report reflects the findings as interpreted by the research team and do not constitute official policy or position by Virginia Commonwealth University or participating school divisions.

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"DEFYING THE ODDS:
A Study of Resilient At-Risk Students"

The purposes of this project are to present background information about at-risk students, to review pertinent literature about successful programs for at-risk students and literature about the characteristics of resilient at-risk students, to present a study of resilient at-risk students, and to present implications of the study for school personnel.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

One of the major concerns in education today is the problem of increasingly high numbers of "at-risk" students. "At-risk" students can be described as those who are in danger of dropping out of school because of academic failure or other problems.

However, Liontos (1991) explains that the term "at-risk" has become a cliche and is used both as a description and a prediction. The term has come to be used to describe a variety of ills, some of them personal, some of them educational, and some of them societal. Educators tend to use the term to refer to school and academic failure, potential dropouts, the educationally disadvantaged, and under-achievement. The term itself appears to have been coined from the title of the report "A Nation At Risk." The term now indicates that it is our children who may be at risk, rather than the nation.

While it appears that many at-risk children are poor minorities, Reed and McCoy (1989) note that most of our children are "at-risk" at one time or another. Today's children and youth, as well as adults, are faced with myriad complex social problems. Much has been written about the effects that problems such as unemployment, divorce, single-parent households, working mothers, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual experimentation, and prejudice and racism have on the lives of children. These problems can have an impact on the lives of children of low income, minority families, as well as the children of well-educated, middle-class majority families. Consequently children from all types of backgrounds can come to school "at-risk."

Liontos (1991) goes on to explain that children at-risk show persistent patterns of under-achievement and patterns of social maladjustment in school. "*Not only are these children failing in school work, they also frequently are having behavior problems in the classroom or are passive and withdrawn. These signs can be seen alarmingly early. One study showed that patterns of under-achievement in third grade were significantly correlated with dropping out of high school. In fact, many children are at risk before they begin school, because of their family situations*" (p. 5).

These patterns dramatically increase the number of children who do not finish school. Sklarz (1989) reports that the national dropout rate averages about 25%. However, a study by Frymier and Gansneder (1989) examined 22,018 students in grades four, seven, and ten and found that between 25% and 33% were seriously at-risk of dropping out. Liontos (1991) reports that the national dropout rate for minorities is higher, with an average of 30% leaving school before they graduate. In Texas, for example, the dropout rate for Hispanic Americans is 45%. In addition, Hahn (1987) indicates that students in urban schools have much higher dropout rates than in other areas. In Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, and other major cities, dropout rates range from 40% to 60% of the total school population.

Reports such as these are cause for alarm among educators and other concerned citizens. No nation can afford to have large numbers of its people under-educated and incapable of gainful employment. The economic, political, and social impact on the future of the United States is too great. Riley (1986) points out that as a nation, we cannot accept the notion that only 50% to 60% of our children are capable of academic achievement and success. We cannot rely on the "survival of the fittest" to support our country. We must not deny at-risk students the education and skills they need to succeed in today's society. Unless we improve the rate of school success for these children, "*we can expect a future that includes a lowered standard of living, fewer government services, intensified class divisions, a weakened democratic process, and lost human potential*" (Liontos, 1991, p. 7).

RATIONALE FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The vast majority of research concerning at-risk students has been focused in two areas - characteristics of these students, and the effectiveness of programs to help at-risk students succeed. Most of the program effectiveness research has been quantitative, with an emphasis on group achievement gains and almost no attention to individual students and their perceptions about why they have succeeded. Thus the premise of this study is that much can be learned directly from students who may be classified as at-risk but are resilient, doing well in school despite the odds against them.

The literature on successful programs and previous investigations of resilient at-risk students will be reviewed to provide a background and context for the present study.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

One approach to improving the school success rate of at-risk students is to develop and implement programs and strategies that focus on the students' needs and problems.

A review of the literature on effective programs for at-risk students can yield valuable suggestions. The attributes of successful programs can be divided into ten categories: (1) Early Intervention, (2) School Climate, (3) Role of the Teacher, (4) Class Size, (5) Parental Involvement, (6) Building Self-Esteem, (7) Guidance and Counseling, (8) Vocational Programs, (9) Extracurricular Activities, and (10) Grade Level Transitions.

I. Early Intervention

There are often signs that a child is at-risk even before kindergarten. If educators monitor progress and problems early and provide help, at-risk students may be able to avoid years of school failure that drastically affect their self-esteem. This process may also increase the children's belief in the fact that teachers are there to help, and that school is a positive place (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989). Early educational experiences may also intervene to break the strong relationship between dysfunctional family characteristics and school failure. One study found

that early childhood education can have immediate and positive effects on a child's intellectual performance. It can reduce by half placement in special education classes and can help prevent dropout in high school (Berrueta-Clement, 1984; Cited in Trachtman, 1991).

II. School Climate

A positive school climate seems to be a great encouragement to stay in school. This climate includes strong leaders who stress academic achievement, maintain order, and work with staff to instill positive values and self-confidence in the students.

Attributes of an inviting and positive climate include ensuring high time-on-task, facilitating a high degree of student interaction, providing positive reinforcement for desired classroom behavior, maintaining high expectations, inviting success, and establishing a cooperative learning environment. Within these attributes, activities include welcoming students, encouraging one-to-one contact with teachers and administrators, and being helpful (Rogus & Wildenhaus, 1991; Ascher & Flaxman, 1987; Griswold, Cotton & Hansen, 1990). Dryfoos (1991) emphasizes that this healthy school climate extends to the whole school, not just the students. This includes effective school organization, school teams, alternative schools, and enhanced teacher roles that influence outcomes in a wide range of behaviors. The author recommends a focus on mental health, physical health, and counseling services. Further, after-school recreation and services need to be more available to extend the inviting climate past the school hours.

The goal of creating an effectively inviting school climate is to enhance a sense of belonging for a group of students who, in many areas of their life, do not feel they belong. This should involve respectful relationships with others and decision-making power for the students. If there is a climate that invites bonding to or engagement in the school process with a feeling that every at-risk student is

essential to the process, then the student will have a personal stake in meeting expectations (Cullen, 1991; Anson, Cook, Habib, Grady, Haynes & Comer, 1991).

III. The Important Role of the Teacher

In the classroom, and in the general school structure, teachers can play immensely important roles in the success or failure of at-risk students. Solomon discusses a successful program in which the faculty were cooperative and mutually supportive, reinforcing the goals and philosophy of the school, and were involved in the resolution of school-wide problems (Solomon, Chaikin & Miller, 1988). Caring, skilled teachers who believe their students can learn and who work with each student's learning styles and speeds as individually as possible are more successful (Green & Baker, 1986; Alderman, 1990; Naylor, 1989; Kammoun, 1991; Cullen, 1991; Brubaker, 1991). The most successful teachers appear to: be respectful of the students, be caring, listen well, have a positive attitude, be honest, provide advice, be patient, be open minded and be firm. The successful teacher is not afraid to interrupt the normal program for student problems nor is he/she wary of expecting positive results of the students (Coburn & Nelson, 1989; Peterson, Bennet & Sherman, 1991; Griswold, et al., 1990).

IV. Small Class Size

Small classes allow time for greater individual attention, which seems to increase the success of at-risk students. The constant attention that is possible in smaller classes adds to the feeling of belonging that an at-risk student needs to become engaged. Lower teacher-student ratios allow for greater monitoring, troubleshooting and early intervention at any sign of problems (Peterson, et al., 1991; Greene, 1986).

One of the characteristics of alternative schools or vocational educational tracks is the lower teacher/student ratio. In this setting, students get more individual

attention and, as many sources show, do better in school (Welch & McKenna, 1988; Iannucilli, 1989).

V. Parent Involvement

Research has shown that parent involvement makes a great difference in student learning. For instance, evidence suggests that children who are actively prepared for preschool by their parents show greater school readiness and early positive attitudes toward learning, and experience fewer grade retentions (Epstein, 1989; Cited in Bempechat & Ginsburg, 1989). It appears that parental involvement can even help improve the home learning environment. Giving parents roles in the school as well as home visiting results in higher-level participation (Dryfoos, 1991). In a recent survey of high school and middle school principals at 100 sites around the country, the principals stated that notifying and conferring with parents about their children are highly effective strategies (Nardini & Antes, 1991). The Comer Model suggests that parents be involved in the planning of all areas of school happenings. This allows a feeling of control as well as increasing vested interest (Anson et al., 1991). Increasing parent-teacher interactions also improves their children's performance (Welch & McKenna, 1988).

VI. Self-Esteem Building and Support

A major issue with most at-risk students is a low self-esteem. With the problems and factors in their lives that make it so hard to succeed, a child may learn at an early age he/she is "no good". Building the foundation for a more positive self-esteem for these students is an important goal. This objective may be difficult, and differential treatment of at-risk students often occurs unwittingly. Tracking, retention and alternative programs all hurt a student's self-esteem. An extra effort must be made, then, to praise and reward the students for positive interactions or behaviors. Providing a system of recognition for valued behavior, even if the definitions of valued behavior must be expanded, is helpful to the at-risk student who is seldom the high achiever in academics or athletics. Receiving recognition

may be the first step toward self-esteem that may begin an upward spiral of further successes (Rogus & Wildenhaus, 1991; Kammoun, 1991; Brodinsky & Keough, 1989).

Uroff and Green (1991) describe a program that has as its main objective increasing students' self-esteem. This is accomplished by training the staff in communication skills, group process, and other problem-solving skills to better prepare them to deal with the students. Furthermore, students are involved in decision-making and disciplining peers as well as community service programs and peer academic motivation and tutoring programs. The principle behind the program is that in raising these at-risk students' self-esteem we can, consequently, help them improve most other areas of their school and life experiences.

VII. Guidance and Mental Health Counseling

Research suggests that counseling programs within a school should be readily available to at-risk students when they need them. Counseling should be an integral part of the school yet not conspicuous so that the students feel others know every time they go. Further, guidance counselors should spend less time modifying individual student behaviors and more time improving the learning environment (Solomon, et al., 1988). Counselors should also have contact with parents and be involved in school decisions and programming.

A case-management style of following at-risk students is a positive way of letting the students know someone is available and caring (Dryfoos, 1991; Gaston, 1987). The possibility of counseling home visits and continued contact with all parts of an at-risk student's life appears to aid in success of any counseling program (Nevetsky, 1991). Flexibility in dealing with different types of problems is also essential in a counseling program. For instance, a counselor must be able to handle a pregnant twelve-year-old and a habitually truant seventeen-year-old (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989).

VIII. Social and Life Skills/Vocational Education

Many at-risk students, when asked why they are dropping out, answer with a comment similar to "I'm bored" or "this stuff does not apply to me. It is not real life." Vocational education and social and life skills training appear to bring many of these at-risk students back into engagement with the school. It is suggested, though, that work-study programs offered to at-risk students early in their high school careers may actually encourage dropping out because the students then see how unrelated the two are. To be effective, vocational programs need to meet many interest levels. Later in high school, and following some career counseling, vocational education may prove to be right for many of the at-risk students (Coyle-Williams, 1989). At-risk students need to be assured that credits for these classes are counted toward graduation (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989).

Vocational classrooms tend to have many positive characteristics, including low teacher-pupil ratio, teachers attuned to student needs, an environment free of absenteeism, theft, and substance abuse, individualization, active student roles, and recognition and special awards (Naylor, 1989). Iannucilli (1989) found that there is a positive correlation between vocational education and school completion. Students involved in vocational education were more likely to be involved in school-sponsored activities that help them shape goals for themselves and their futures.

IX. Peer Involvement/Extracurricular

At-risk students are more unlikely than other students to become involved in extracurricular events unless a teacher or administrator issues personal invitations. This hesitancy stems from the lack of a feeling of belonging. Extracurricular events, however, seem to increase peer involvement and membership in school organizations (Rogus & Wildenhaus, 1991). Extracurricular involvement may also provide an arena where new activities are experienced and less healthy choices (drugs, crime) are avoided. For parents that work, extracurricular experiences can

provide a safe place for the student with supervision. It has been suggested that students involved in extracurricular events are less likely to drop out (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989).

X. **Easing Grade Level Transitions**

It has been found that schools lose the greatest number of students between grades and especially during times of transition between elementary and junior high or middle school, and between junior high or middle school and high school. The middle school years appear to be particularly important. It is believed that a propensity for dropping out is formed in the middle school years, although actual dropping out usually takes place in high school. Early attempts at easing the transitions and improving attitudes toward school for these at-risk students has great potential to increase completion of school. These attempts can include mentoring or buddy programs, increased parent contact, increased counseling, and/or extra effort in making newcomers feel welcome (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989; Nevetsky, 1991).

LITERATURE REVIEW OF RESILIENT AT-RISK STUDENTS

Another approach to improving the school success rate of at-risk students is to examine the notion of "resilience." Despite incredible hardships and the presence of several at-risk factors, there are some students who have developed characteristics and coping skills that enable them to succeed. They appear to develop stable, healthy personas and are able to recover from or adapt to life's stresses and problems. These students can be termed "*resilient*".

Winfield (1991) suggests that in order to move beyond simply identifying and categorizing children as at-risk, the focus must shift to understanding the concepts of "resilience." The critical issue for policy and instruction becomes studying and identifying the processes and mechanisms which reduce risk and foster resilience.

Approximately 19% of at-risk students (Peng, Wang & Walberg, 1992) become individuals with sound values, high self-esteem, good interpersonal relationships, success in school, and positive goals and plans for the future. What enables these resilient students to become individuals who are active and positive members of society? What can educators and other concerned citizens do to foster these qualities in the 81% of at-risk students who do not have them?

A review of literature about the characteristics of successful at-risk students reveals some of the resilient characteristics that should be considered in any plan of action. These characteristics can be divided into three categories: (1) Personal Factors, (2) Family Factors, and (3) School Factors.

Personal Factors

A. Resilient at-risk students possess temperamental characteristics that elicit positive responses from individuals around them. These personality traits begin in early childhood and are manifested in children who are affectionate, good natured, cuddly, and easy to relate to. In later childhood, these children appear to play autonomously, seek out new experiences, lack fear and seem self-reliant. Yet, they are able to ask for and receive help from adults if needed (Werner, 1984). These at-risk students then start a cycle of positive reciprocity, and, despite problems at home, are able to reach out to other people and expect help. Their positive attitudes are usually rewarded with helpful reactions from those around them. Thus, they come to see the world as a positive place in spite of the difficult issues with which they have to deal. Geary (1988) explains that to teachers academic success is based primarily on a student's 'positive attitude' as well as his or her ability to work hard. This positive attitude includes respecting others, coming to class prepared, volunteering for in and out-of-class assignments, and knowing how to play the school game.

B. High intrinsic motivation and internal locus of control seem to enable resilient at-risk students to succeed. Many students who fail continuously seem to have an external locus of control and blame others and events outside of themselves for their failure (Peng, et al., 1992). A sense of internal locus of control needs to be developed in at-risk students and may be increased by teachers who promote self-efficacy through mastery of new experiences (Peng, et al., 1992). In a qualitative study of Native American students who were graduating from high school, many of the resilient students spoke of satisfaction gained from experiencing success in self-fulfilling activities. This was motivated by a desire to succeed, to be self-motivated, and to be personally responsible for one's achievements. Many of the Native American students felt a strong pull to succeed to help the image of Native Americans in the United States. Strong values about education and independence were apparent.

C. Active involvement in extracurricular events at school and in other areas seems to provide a refuge for resilient students. Hobbies, creative interests, and sports promote the growth of self-esteem through success in a chosen activity. Being recognized and supported for special talents are also important. In addition, the simple involvement in an activity considered special appears to increase self-esteem and a belief in one's ability to succeed (Geary, 1988; Werner, 1984; Coburn & Nelson, 1989).

D. Involvement in "required helpfulness" is a powerful factor in resilient students' experiences. Required helpfulness may mean volunteer work in the community, tutoring or buddying at school, and taking care of siblings or helping at home. These activities seem to lend purpose to the difficult life of an at-risk student as well as to increase caring about fellow human beings. They realize there are people that even they can help (Werner, 1984; Philliber, 1986).

Family Factors

A. Most resilient at-risk students have had the opportunity to establish a close bond with at least one caregiver who gave them much attention in the crucial early years of life. This attention enabled the children to establish a sense of trust. This trust becomes very important in later interactions with teachers and peers and is prominent in the students' development. This support may be from people other than parents. It may be from alternative caregivers such as siblings, aunts, uncles or grandparents who become positive role models. Resilient children seem to be adept at finding these substitute caregivers, much like they can elicit positive responses from many people around them (Werner, 1984).

B. Family support seems to be an attribute of successful at-risk students. Parents of resilient students have higher expectations for their children's education. These expectations exert pressure on the children to remain engaged in school and work toward high achievement. These students are more likely to interact with parents, have more learning materials in the home, and to be involved in more out-of-school educational activities than non-resilient at-risk students (Peng, et al., 1992).

C. Interestingly, family composition seems to have no significant effect on at-risk students' success or failure. Students living with both parents did not necessarily have a higher level of resiliency than students in single parent families or other configurations. Instead, good parent-child relationships and supportive personal attachments appear to act as protective factors from the environment. Parental commitment to their children seems to provide informal counseling, support, and help in achieving success (Peng, et al., 1992). This parental commitment lends a feeling of coherence to the family unit. Werner (1984) states that these strong family ties aid in at-risk students' believing that life makes sense and that they have some control over their own lives. This sense of meaning is a powerful motivation for many resilient at-risk students.

D. The educational background of parents is related to student resiliency. In one study, Peng, et al., (1992) found that less than 11% of students whose parents had less than a high school education were classified as resilient students, as compared to 23% of students whose parents had a high school education or beyond. There seem to be implications for parental education in low-income areas. Since under-education of parents leads to less positive parent-student interaction, educational programs for parents may indeed increase achievement of at-risk children.

School Factors

A. Resilient students seem to find support outside of the home environment. This support is most often found in school. These students tend to be liked by their peers and have at least one close confidante (Werner, 1984). Friendships with other students and seeing them succeed was very important to resilient Native American students (Coburn & Nelson, 1989). It appears that resilient students have an informal network of people in their lives to whom they can turn when in crisis. Peer groups are often chosen to motivate each other and to provide help in academic and other areas (Geary, 1988).

B. Resilient students seem to like school, in general. Most attempt to involve themselves in classroom discussion and activities. School is more than academics for these students. Most are involved in at least one extracurricular event which becomes an informal source of support. Not only does the extracurricular event increase involvement, belonging, and self-esteem, it also provides a network of people who have a common bond and work in cooperation with each other (Werner, 1984; Coburn & Nelson, 1989). Extracurricular events at school, especially sports, seem to mitigate the powerful and widespread peer pressure not to do well. Resilient at-risk students want to do well academically, and to succeed, but they do not want to be "nerds". Many seem to feel they must be involved with a non-

academic activity in order to fit in with the majority of school students. This involvement in school activities maintains the resilient at-risk students positive engagement in school (Geary, 1988).

C. Teachers can play an important role in the success of resilient students. In qualitative studies, resilient at-risk students have often mentioned school staff who have taken a personal interest in them as being important to their success. Both interpersonal relations and professional competence are important to at-risk students. Among the interpersonal qualities of a teacher that resilient students claim are important are: to care, to have respect for them as persons and as learners, to have an ability to get along with them, to listen to what they say without being intrusive, to take them seriously, to be available, to understand, to help and provide encouragement, and to laugh with them. Professional behavior and competence are also important. Resilient at-risk students look for these qualities: the ability to represent and further the goals of the system and the school, a willingness to listen to the motivations behind inappropriate behavior before they discipline, fairness and respect in grading and instruction, praise and encouragement that they can succeed, and a willingness to get to know the students academically as well as personally so as to increase individual learning (Geary, 1988; Coburn & Nelson, 1989; Werner, 1984). Native American students in one study made it clear they wanted to be treated equally to non-Native American students, which included instilling pride in their heritage (Coburn & Nelson, 1989). This recommendation seems appropriate for other minority group students as well.

In conclusion, the literature on resilient students seems to imply that a web of abilities and support enable these students to succeed. The students seem to have personal strength and temperament that allow them to search out help and become self-reliant. They also are able to elicit help from others and tend to have at least one caregiver who has instilled a sense of hope and trust in them. Thus, their view of the world is positive

despite some intense hardships. Parental involvement and support tends to be available to these resilient students. Finally, school is an important place for these youngsters. A strong school experience may help mitigate home and societal problems. Teachers and peers at school play an important role in resilient students' success, as do extracurricular events and volunteer work. All these factors need to be considered in understanding the puzzle of at-risk youth and why some students are successful, or resilient, and others are not.

While the literature about resilient at-risk students yields several viable conclusions, most of the studies cited are quantitative. These studies tend to emphasize group achievement gains and pay little attention to individual students and *their* perceptions about why they have been successful. A qualitative study that attempts to record the self-perceptions of resilient students would add other dimensions to our understanding of them. This additional information could enhance plans for promoting and increasing specific educational opportunities for all at-risk students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary purpose of this research was to investigate the characteristics of at-risk students who have been academically successful. The research questions concerning these "resilient" students included the following:

> Why have these students succeeded when others with similar characteristics have not?
>
> What critical incidents or events were influential in helping these students?
>
> What was the locus of control for these students - What did they do for themselves, and what is their perception about what others did for them?
>
> What is the perspective of these resilient students toward school activities and teaching practices that are intended to assist the at-risk population?
>
> What do these students see as most important in their success? Why?

What is the organization of the school and the classrooms of these students and how did this contribute to their success?

Are there specific factors or variables that are common for resilient students?

What strategies do students believe helped them to succeed?

What strategies are needed for particular at-risk characteristics or categories?

METHODOLOGY

These questions are best answered with qualitative case study methodology. A case study is a detailed, in-depth investigation of a single subject, group, or phenomenon. In this study the single group is those at-risk students who have been successful academically. The case study approach was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of these students and how they have been able to "defy the odds".

The focal point of the case study is the perceptions of these resilient students. This was accomplished by conducting individual depth interviews with students who have been identified as resilient. The interviews were semi-structured, with prompts as appropriate to investigate perceptions of activities and experiences that the literature has found to be effective, e.g., student involvement in school activities, expectations communicated by significant others, level of work and effort, staying out of trouble, relations with teachers, and classroom demands. In addition, demographic and other information was gathered for each individual so that student profiles could be created. These profiles are helpful in identifying common practices and trends across individuals that may support general principles for helping at-risk students. Essentially the methodology generated a set of best practices from student perceptions and experiences.

Participants

A purposeful nonprobability sample was selected from six school divisions in central Virginia representing urban, suburban, and rural localities. Students were identified by

asking principals and guidance counselors in the school divisions for nominations. The research team members from the local school divisions assisted in developing the nomination form by first reviewing a draft nomination form, and then by asking one or two principals or counselors to read the form and provide feedback about the clarity of purpose, directions, questions, and other aspects of the form. Based on these suggestions the nomination form was finalized. Each of the research team members from the local school divisions then asked up to five principals and/or counselors from elementary, middle, and secondary levels to complete the nominations. This resulted in a total of 45 nominators across the six school divisions. Each of the 45 nominators completed nomination forms for two or three students. The nomination forms provided a definition of "resilient at-risk" as students who, while having background characteristics common to the at-risk population, have demonstrated a consistent pattern of success or improvement that would ensure promotion if sustained throughout the year. On the nomination form the principal or counselor indicated the name, age, race, and gender of the student, checked at-risk characteristics of the student, indicated the three characteristics that were most important in determining that the student was at-risk, and indicated why they believed the student was a good example of a resilient at-risk student. (see Figure 1)

One hundred and fifteen students were nominated in January, 1992. These nominations were reviewed by the research team and 85 were selected to represent different genders, races, and types of at-risk characteristics for elementary, middle, and secondary levels. Parental permission was requested for selected students, resulting in 62 students that comprised the final sample. (See Table 1)

Procedures

An interview form and protocol were developed by the research team (Appendix A). A draft of the interview form was pilot tested by two members of the research team with two students identified through the nomination process. The interview was structured to first ask questions about the students' hobbies, goals and how they spent their spare

Figure 1
Defying the Odds: A Study of Resilient At-Risk Students
Sponsored by the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium
1/20/92

Resilient At-Risk Student Nomination Form Directions

Please use your knowledge of your students to identify TWO or THREE students who would be considered clear examples of individuals who have significant at-risk characteristics and who have been academically successful (resilient). Your selections should be students in third grade 3 or higher who you believe would be able and willing to share their thoughts and feelings in an interview with an adult whom they do not know.

At-Risk Students are individuals who, because of their background characteristics, are possible candidates for failing in school or dropping out.

For the purposes of this study, **Resilient At-Risk Students** are students who have background characteristics that have put them at-risk who, despite the odds, have been successful. These students have demonstrated a consistent pattern of success or improvement. They are currently demonstrating achievement levels which would ensure promotion if sustained throughout the year. Other traits may include staying out of trouble, being involved in school activities, being attentive and on-task in class, appearing motivated to want to do well, having clear goals, and possessing a desire to attain specific work skills that will qualify them for a good job.

Please use one Nomination Form for each student. Please complete the student background information section, then indicate his/her at-risk characteristics by checking all the characteristics that apply. Then prioritize what you consider to be the most important characteristics in each case. If possible, ONE nominee should be receiving special education services.

Finally, please summarize why you believe your nominations are good examples of students who are resilient. Please be as specific as possible in your explanation.

Please return the completed forms in the enclosed envelop to:

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Figure 1 continued

Resilient At-risk Student Nomination Form

Background Information

Student # 1. Name: _____
Age: _____
Grade: _____
School: _____
Gender: (circle one) M F
Race: (check one)
__Asian\Pacific Islander
__Black
__Hispanic
__Native American
__White
__Other
If Appropriate, Special Education Classification:
_____

At-Risk Characteristics of this Student (check all that apply):

___1. eligible for free and reduced price lunch
___2. dysfunctional family (includes both single and dual parent homes)
___3. low socioeconomic status
___4. retained once
___5. retained twice
___6. poor attendance
___7. behavior problems
___8. low academic performance
___9. health problems
__10. suspended from school
__11. substance abuse
__12. trouble with the law
__13. receiving special education services
__14. disrespectful of authority
__15. difficulty with interpersonal relations/peer interactions
__16. other (write in) _____

Of those checked above, which three characteristics are most important in determining that this student is at-risk?
(write in #s 1-16)

_____ _____ _____

Why do you believe that this student is a good example of a **resilient** at-risk student, one who is now succeeding?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Table 1: Demographic Summary of Student Participants

Grade Level	Total	M	F	Black	White	Hispanic
Elementary	27	14	13	10	17	
Middle	16	12	4	9	6	1
Secondary	19	11	8	5	14	
Total	62	37	25	24	37	1

time, to next ask about school and learning (e.g., What teachers do you like the best, and why? How are you doing in school? Why are you good at certain subjects? Who in the school has been particularly helpful to you? What advice would you give to students who do not do well in school? What could schools and teachers do to help students do better in school?), next to ask questions about their neighborhood and home (e.g., Is there anything about your home or neighborhood that has helped you in school?), and finally to ask about help from others (e.g., When you have a problem to solve, who do you go to for help, and why? Are there any special programs or activities that you especially like? Who do you especially like or admire?).

The interviewers consisted of three university professors, a graduate student, and four school division central office professionals. All the interviewers had previous experience and training in conducting interviews. Further training was provided by analyzing the two pilot interviews of resilient at-risk students, and by all interviewers meeting after some initial interviews to refine questions and procedures. All interviewers followed the same sequence in asking questions as specified in the interview protocol. Notes were taken during each interview, with further detail added after the interview in written form. Forty three of the interviews were taped-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interviews lasted between one half and one hour, and took place at each student's school during the school day.

Data Analysis

Two approaches to analyzing the data were utilized. The first was to assemble all members of the research team as a group and together review the written notes of interviewers from each interview, by question, to reveal common trends and issues. The second procedure was to have each school division research team member independently review a randomly selected set of six interview transcriptions to answer the research questions. In addition, one university research team member reviewed all the elementary student transcriptions, another university research team member reviewed all the middle student transcriptions, and a third university research team member reviewed

all the high school transcriptions. The coding for analyzing the transcripts is illustrated in Figure 2. An example of a complete coded interview is illustrated in Appendix B. The entire team met to synthesize the findings from the analysis of the transcripts and integrate these conclusions with the first review.

Figure 2

Transcript Codes

1 - use of spare time; involvement in organizations or activities
2 - goals
3 - school attitudes
4 - attitudes about good teachers
5 - relationship with parents
6 - perception of success in school subjects
7 - subjects that are difficult or give trouble
8 - school personnel who have been helpful
9 - why other students don't do well
10 - advice for students who don't do well
11 - advice for what schools or teachers could do to help students
12 - home conditions
13 - neighborhood conditions
14 - aspects of home or neighborhood that have helped
15 - others to go to when they have a problem and need help
16 - others who are especially admired
17 - wishes for the future
18 - personal responsibility; internal control
19 - positive self-efficacy
20 - reality check

RESULTS

The results are presented by important themes that were identified in analyzing the interviews, followed by profiles of selected students. Where appropriate, differences related to grade level will be indicated within the discussion of each theme. A model that integrates the themes is also presented. The themes can be classified generally as falling into six categories: current activities, goals, personality characteristics, opinions about school, opinions about home and neighborhood, and opinions about help from others.

There were not significant differences among the responses by community setting (urban, suburban, or rural), gender, or race. Students with disabilities or those receiving special education services did not respond differently, as a group, from the other students.

Current Activities

The participants were asked about their hobbies, activities in clubs, church, or other organizations, and about how they spend their time. It was clear that there was **positive use of time** and **meaningful involvement** in school and/or other activities. With some exceptions, this involvement was not in a special program or group for at-risk students or students with specific problems. Elementary students spend their spare time with a wide array of hobbies and interests that included both individual and group activities, such as reading, sports, riding bikes, and organized activities. Many of the elementary students went to Sunday school. Most older students worked and were involved in several meaningful activities, such as music, band, sports, hunting, or church:

> Youth group at church...I do special olympics...I do scale models, race radio-controlled cars and airplanes.
>
> I'm in a jazz program in school.
>
> I like playing some sports, like boxing. I like football. I spend a lot of time with my girlfriend. I work 2-3 days a week. I go to night school.

This positive involvement did not leave these students with much spare time:

> Run track, play tennis, a lot of extracurricular activities. Go to night school. Ride horses. Go to church whenever I can. Don't really have a lot of spare time.

When asked about how the school can help other students succeed the participants often mentioned the importance of involvement:

> Get involved in extracurricular activities. Anything besides just going home and getting into trouble.
>
> Have more activities for the students to become involved in.

Such involvement may provide an important social-psychological support system by connecting the students to others in meaningful ways. Success in these activities may be important in enhancing self-esteem by providing recognition and a sense of accomplishment. Interestingly, few of the participants mentioned that television was watched very much, if at all.

Goals

Students were asked to indicate goals and wishes. Elementary and middle school students articulated clear long term goals, even if many of the goals were not very realistic:

> The first thing I want to do is get a job. When I grow up I want to be a lawyer. I'll make a lot of money and then I can get a lot of stuff.
>
> Want to join the air force and fly a plane.
>
> I want to be a professional football player.

Older students also had **clear** and **specific goals**. Their goals were much more realistic, tended to be long term, and usually included some college education:

> Start off at John Tyler [community college] and then hope to go to a four year college or go into the military.
>
> Go to John Tyler ... then to Rutgers University.
>
> I'm going back to work at the paper company ... maybe to Richard Bland College.
>
> Go to college and get my masters in something with recreation or leisure.
>
> Try to get into a college.
>
> I was thinking of cosmetology, or child or secretarial work. I think it's gonna be child care.

Their responses to questions about goals showed that they were **motivated** to do well and **optimistic** about the future. They had **hope**, despite all the negative circumstances in their lives, and confidence that they could achieve their long range goals. For many of the older students a particular experience, either direct or vicarious, reinforced the importance of getting an education. These might be called "**reality checks**" because they seemed to motivate the students toward positive goals. The reality check may have been dropping out of school, becoming pregnant, being in drug rehabilitation, or some other difficult event or circumstance that showed them that without an education their goals would be limited. As a result, these students were very mature in their explanations and goals.

The wishes expressed by the students were also very revealing about their hopes as well as their present circumstances. Three wishes expressed by one elementary student are typical:

> That I was magic. That my mom would come back. And that I lived in a mansion.

Personality Characteristics

The participants were asked about what they believe contributed most to their success, and why they believe others who may be similar to them have not done as well. The responses to these and related questions very clearly revealed an **internal locus of control** and **personal responsibility** for their successes and failures. Poor performance is **attributed to internal factors** such as a lack effort like not caring, not trying, not studying as much as they need to, goofing off and playing around. Most respondents thought that poor performing students could do better if they put in more work and got serious about school. A strong sense of **self-efficacy** was indicated; the students were successful because they have chosen to be so, and gave much credit to themselves:

> I've proven it to myself that I could get out. A lot of it, I think, is just maturity.
>
> I want it and they [less successful students] don't.
>
> Some students have no motivation ... they get themselves into trouble.
>
> They're lazy; they don't want to do the work ... work as hard as you can and it will probably pay off.
>
> They're lazy and don't feel like doing the work ... stop goofing off.
>
> I want it and they don't.
>
> Stop goofing off. You only got 4 more years, why just sit here and go through it.

> It's not the teacher's fault that these kids are dropping out, it's the attitude that these kids have.
>
> I'm failing one class ... it's not their fault [school], it's mine from not doing all the work.

The students did not believe school, neighborhood, or family was critical in either their successes or failures. Sometimes a poor home environment would make things difficult - most of the students lived in dysfunctional families and lived in a low socioeconomic area - but they would not blame their performance on these factors. The students also did not blame their peer group or friends. Most indicated an independence from others and were comfortable being different from their peers:

> The way I've been raised is to be independent, have a mind of my own and decide for myself what fits my lifestyle.

Opinions About School

The **perceived** influence of school and teachers was inversely related to grade level. The higher the grade level the less influential. For younger students teachers and counselors play an important role in their experiences and successes. Older students seem to tolerate school as necessary and find that some teachers and others in school provide important support and encouragement. They are "getting through" and tend to have a neutral attitude toward school.

Most of the elementary school students wanted a "fun" environment at school and in class. They like to learn and want to be taught in a way that holds their interest. They describe teachers they like best as being "nice." The term "**nice**" was mentioned by almost all the elementary students, meaning easy to get along with, **funny**, humorous, not too strict or punishing but **somewhat strict** in their classwork and discipline, **easy to talk with**, **patient**, willing to **listen** and **explain** things, and able to **keep control** without compromising the fun learning atmosphere:

My math teacher because she is funny and crazy. She makes math a lot of fun but she is also strict.

Because they make things fun for you ... they try to make them funner than other teachers.

There are nicer teachers here.

The ones I like laugh and joke around and all that.

They like to teach, they don't rush you, they take their time, they are nice to me, they make sure I understand and I know it better.

I can discuss problems with her ... she has a nice personality.

Elementary students were more likely than older students to indicate that counselors, teachers, and principals contributed to their success in school. The "significant" adults mentioned appeared to go "above and beyond" the call of duty. They **spend time** with students, even after school or on weekends. Several students specifically mentioned **support or counseling groups** in schools as being very helpful. The groups included ones on divorce, children of alcoholics, and anger control. Counselors were very important to many of these students by conveying a sense of privacy and trust. The students were adamant about needing to talk to someone who would not tell anyone else what they said.

For older students, the focus was on their level of expectations and the extent to which they **care** about the student. "Good" teachers have **positive expectations** with students and can be very influential. Students feel that they can talk to "good" teachers and counselors about almost anything and the teacher or counselor will listen without judging the student. These counselors and teachers would "**push**" the students and at the same time be very **supportive**. Good teachers make a conscious effort to help students understand difficult content. Teachers and counselors are helpful if they care, have high expectations, and are supportive:

> She is nice and she talks to me ... she understands my problems.
>
> Because she pushes you to put forth your best effort.
>
> She's always there for everybody ... she's real nice and helps out.
>
> Some teachers just seem like they're there because it's their job and they just show up so they can get paid ... other teachers will put forth that extra effort.
>
> They listen to you and stuff and they don't put you down.
>
> She was strict but she was nice.
>
> Because she is so supportive ... she doesn't give false hopes but she is encouraging.
>
> I like the teachers that you know what to expect from and you that they're going to help you in any way they can ... I don't like teachers who don't really care about the kids.
>
> You can tell her anything about you and even if it's bad she's not gonna think any less of you.

The students seemed very aware of the motivation of teachers. They felt it was "OK" for teachers who cared about students to be strict and demanding. Their attitudes about school were bland. They were neither excited about nor critical of school. School was tolerated, viewed as "fine"; the specific classes and individuals in school were perceived as being more influential. Some of the students indicated that individualized after-school and tutorial programs would help students.

Opinions About Home and Neighborhood

Almost all of these students come from dysfunctional homes. Many have severe stressors in the home, either due to family make-up or the absence of one or both of their parents. Interestingly, most respondents like where they live and feel that their living conditions are fine. They do not believe, in the main, that either the neighborhood or

home is influential in school success. Homes and neighborhoods are described as difficult but they are not seen as a hinderance:

> I have a crazy household. One of my sisters just moved back home with her twins. My mom works two full-time jobs and my dad doesn't work because he is sick.
>
> Not many people over there [the neighborhood] get into trouble because the cops are always down there. It's a pretty good neighborhood...It's a good neighborhood because the cops keep them straight and if something goes wrong, just call the cops and they come right there.
>
> My mom and dad divorced when I was three. My mom lives in North Carolina. My dad works from 3 in the afternoon until 11 at night.
>
> It's that part that's getting burglarized and all that. My step-mother is always staying up to wait for my brother to come home. And I stay up ... I'm like looking out the window to see if there are any strangers in our yard or anything like that.
>
> It's a little better living with my dad than mom. He doesn't yell at me as much as my mom does.
>
> My real dad, my mom and him are still married but she wants a divorce. He lives in Florida, and he left when I was two. I don't really care about him; he tried kidnapping me when he came for a visit.
>
> My aunt motivates me; she threatens that if I get kicked out of school I will have to go back to my mom's. I get along with her husband now that I don't live there. My younger brother's in jail.
>
> I walk to school, ride the bus home. I like living there, but don't get along with my mom and her husband. I moved in with my aunt.

Many students indicated a need for a home environment **free of distractions**. They like where they live but realize that it could be better. This was reflected in many of the "wishes" that mentioned a better home.

Help From Others

Most of these students had little difficulty in naming one or more persons who had been "significant" in helping them. The person was usually an adult, most commonly the mother. The relationship was described as a **trusting** one. When asked about role models (Who do you especially like or admire?) they usually mentioned an adult with whom they had close contact, such as a family member, rather than a sports figure or other celebrity. Mothers, grandparents, and teachers or counselors were chosen most frequently by younger students; older students mentioned friends as much as adults. Like good teachers, the ones most admired were also persons who took a **great interest in them** and were **willing to listen without criticizing or judging**. Virtually all the students indicated that there was someone trustworthy to whom they could go for help:

> I'd be more willing to talk to my mother ... there's very few people that you can really truly trust with things.
>
> Me and my mom get along great.
>
> My mother because she is supportive of me and she gives good advice.
>
> Probably a really good friend, or Miss ___. I'd go to someone I could really trust, which is only about 4 people.
>
> My grandpa; he's always been there for me if I've had any trouble.

Summary of Results

Resilient "at-risk" students have a set of personality characteristics, disposition, and beliefs that promote the students' academic success regardless of their background and current circumstances. They have an internal locus of control and healthy internal attributions, taking personal responsibility for their successes and failures. They have positive expectations about their ability and the future, an optimistic perspective with realistic long range goals. This strong sense of hope was accompanied by a belief that doing well in school is necessary to do well in life. There was a sense of purpose with

these students. They were very mature in their outlook and attitudes, and tended to make positive choices about how to use their time. When there were problems or difficulties these students were willing to reach out for help. They seem more able to cope with stress, resolve personal problems, and keep their focus on doing well in school.

To develop these characteristics the resilient students had a psychological support system that provided a safety net and encouragement. This system was evident in the way they are meaningfully connected to others, in and/or out of school. These students were actively involved in positive activities that provide a sense of support, success, and recognition. For older students school did not seem to be very important - something more to get through and tolerate than to like. Younger students were enthusiastic about school and derived much support and recognition from teachers and counselors. School appeared to play a more significant role in the lives of younger students. Older students were likely to have had an experience that showed them that without an education they would not be successful. It was as if these experiences opened their eyes to the deleterious impact of unhealthy beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.

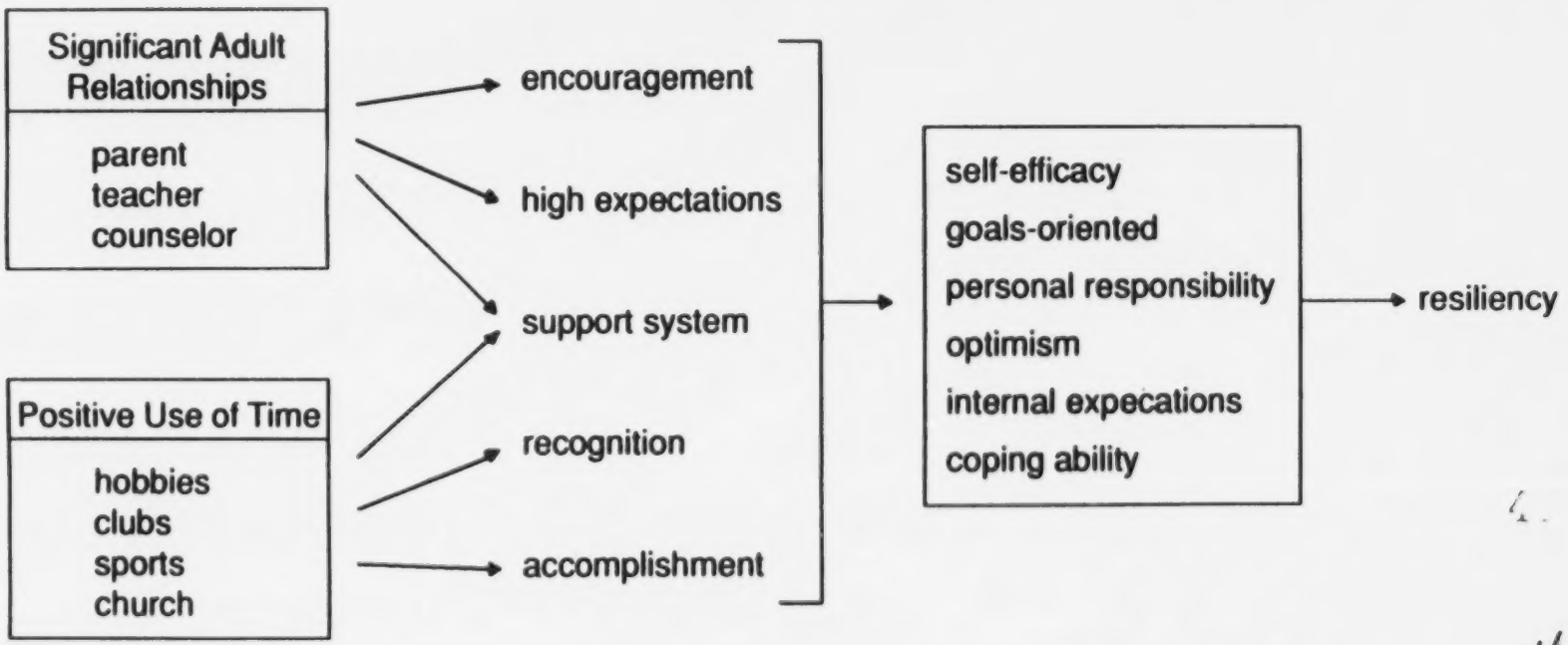
Resilient students have adults, usually a parent (more often mother than father), with whom they have a trusting relationship. These adults had high expectations, and provided support and encouragement with firmness ("tough love"). Students respected these adults because they obviously cared about their welfare. For younger students, teachers and counselors may be very important in situations where there is lack of a positive relationship with a parent or other family member.

These findings suggest that there are important environment factors that influence the development of strong, resilient personalities and beliefs. This can be illustrated with the conceptual model in Figure 3.

The model shows how significant relationships with adults and positive use of time provide encouragement, high expectations, a psychological support system, and recognition and accomplishment. These environmental factors influence these students so that they develop self-efficacy, goals, personal responsibility, etc. It is these traits that make students resilient. The challenge to schools is to provide the relationships and involvement that can foster this development. It is clear that the day to day efforts of teachers, counselors, and administrators can make a difference by providing positive relationships and by creating and maintaining a positive environment.

Figure 3

A Conceptual Model of Factors Influencing Resilient At-Risk Students



PROFILES OF RESILIENT AT-RISK STUDENTS

Susan

Susan is a 17 year old articulate and mature senior attending high school. Most of the students in the school, including Susan, come from a high socioeconomic status family. She has, in her words, "a crazy household." One of her three older sisters just moved back home with twins, and her mom works two full-time jobs because her father is ill and doesn't work. Susan indicated that "half of the time I feel like I'm the mom because my sister's never there to watch her own kids. Last year Susan failed all her classes and was retained. Her attendance was poor, she had behavioral problems, and was constantly leaving school with "questionable" people. Susan was missing her classes and was set to potentially drop out of school, but she made a complete turnabout and is now an honor roll student. What happened to Susan and why and how did she get back on the right track?

As Susan said it, "Last year I didn't really care about being here. I was hardly here and when I was here I'd leave. I didn't really care about myself. Probably the guy I was dating had a lot to do with it. I had of lot of anger built in me and I just let it go last year and got it all out of my system. I never realized that grades had such an influence on what you're going to do with the rest of your life." It was as if Susan began to realize what was happening to her and the consequences of her behavior: "I'm more down to reality and know that jobs are getting harder and harder to find." Her parents had indicated to her, when she was having difficulty that if she left home not "to come crawling back."

She wouldn't go to her parents for help because "they already have too much on their minds." She does go to another sister for help because "she's made a lot out of herself. She's done very well for herself. She's probably the only sister who's never had to move back home or say 'mom and dad can I have more money?'" Obviously Susan wants to be independent.

Now Susan has goals. She wants to go to college, "hopefully I'll make something out of myself. I definitely want to do something with my life." Susan plays tennis for the school and enjoys other sports.

Susan felt that she turned her life around because she made the choice to do it. This internal sense of control and responsibility was evident when she talked about why other students in trouble were not turning things around: "I want it and they don't. I want to do something whereas they think they're going to get out of high school somehow and make all this money somehow. I'm not a dreamer...I'm more down to reality and know jobs are getting harder and harder to find." To help other struggling students she suggested: "Stress how hard it is to get a job, even with a college education. Make people realize that they won't get anywhere if they drop out of school... stop viewing short term and view long-term instead."

Susan also had clear opinions about teachers and school. While she didn't think school could have much positive influence with students who aren't internally motivated, she had some very helpful relationships with teachers. For instance, she described her art teacher as good because she is "one of those teachers who really cares about you, that would really go all out for you. And anytime you have a problem and you go to her she's gonna help you with it. She might not solve it for you, because she wants you to solve it on your own ... you can tell her anything about you, and even if it's bad she's not gonna think any less of you ... unlike other teachers where if you tell them the truth you feel like they're gonna get you in trouble." Susan did think that teachers could help students like her: "Get more teachers that understand how you're feeling and understand what you're going through, teachers that you shouldn't be afraid to open up to and tell them 'I'm really scared, what can I do about it'... most teachers would say things like 'go home and study'... you need a lot more than that."

David

David is an 11 year old 5th grader receiving special education services for a hearing disability. He lives in a neighborhood "that's getting burglarized and all that ... I'm like looking out the window and see if there are any strangers in our yard or anything like that." David's parents are divorced and his older brother has been in a lot of trouble and has failed in school. He lives with his stepmom and dad and sees a lot of his grandfather. David has been retained once, but is now displaying a good attitude toward learning, putting forth good effort with good attendance. He wants to be "a football star ... after that I'll probably go into the army."

David has found that teachers can be very important in school. When asked if anyone in the school has been particularly helpful he mentioned several teachers: "Some of them is really strict ... the ones I like laugh and joke around and all that." One teacher has been particularly helpful because "she's always on the left so I can hear her;" and another because "he'll talk to me like [when running the mile] 'speed up, you're losing your pace'; some give me a longer time to work on my schoolwork." He thought that schools could be more helpful to kids if they could "pay more attention to kids who need help, don't have a teacher's pet (my teacher has a few of them), and don't give too much homework."

When asked about why some students don't do well, David observed: "they goof off and play around, don't listen to the teacher and smart-mouth.... I'd tell them 'you'd better shape up or you won't go to the junior high next year'." "You've gotta get an education."

When asked if there was anyone he especially admired he said "my mom and dad. My grandpa, he's always been there for me if I've had any trouble. Usually between 3 and 4 my dad helps me work on my homework."

Wade

Wade is an 18 year old junior. In the past few years he has lived with his grandparents, with his father in Arkansas, with his sister, in a motel, with his father again in Kentucky, and presently lives with a friend in his friend's house. He couldn't seem to get along with his mother. Last year he dropped out of school and was hospitalized for substance abuse (his second time). Today Wade is working 2-3 days a week at Ukrops and the Country Club of Virginia. He also goes to night school to make up credits. On his most recent interim report he received five As.

Wade wants to be a contractor but also plans to go to college - "I'll probably go to college in the spring ... maybe to VCU, Richard Bland, or John Tyler ... I was thinking about studying history."

Wade has some very clear notions about why he is doing well in school despite his history of difficulties - "I've proven it to myself that I could get out. They [students at-risk] let themselves get down. A lot of it, I think, is just maturity. As they get older, things start making more sense to them. If you're in that slump and don't care you're not going to listen until you're ready to change yourself. I'd just tell them [students at-risk] the way it was; nobody can fix stuff for them." Despite this internal sense of responsibility he did admit that schools could have a positive impact: "Counselors can make you feel really good about yourself, too, if they know you're feeling bad. I think some teachers really gave me a break .... teachers could pay a little bit more attention to what's going on with different kids. I'm sure they do, but I know that there are a lot of teachers who just do their job without the extras, by the contract." Wade also appreciates his bosses - "they B.S. around with me a lot, we just talk about whatever."

It seems that Wade has experienced a reality about life that has focused his energy to succeed. When he was out of school, looking for work, he realized that he couldn't get a decent job. Between that and his drug problems he has come to understand the importance of success and school and has taken personal responsibility for that success.

Mike

Mike is a 15 year old eighth grader. He has the typical background for being at-risk - low socioeconomic background and a dysfunctional family. He lives with his father, his mother lives in Missouri. ("It's a little better living with my dad than my mom. He doesn't yell at me as much as my mom does.") His brothers and sisters have frequently been in trouble in and out of school. However Mike achieves well, attends regularly, exhibits excellent behavior, and participates in extracurricular activities. Despite his background and family circumstances he is not at-risk academically.

Mike likes sports and he wants "to go to college and run." He's on the track team this year. He does well in school and is willing to seek out help when he needs it. Mike thinks schools could help students by keeping them after school and providing assistance.

"Sometimes teachers go too fast for them."

Mike finds that teachers who take time with him and are "nice" are the best. "My English teacher ... goes to my church, she talks to me a lot. She says things like, 'You're doing better, keep it up.' My P.E. teacher, when I'm getting ready to try out for teams and stuff, he'll be supportive...Some [teachers] are a lot nicer and they'll talk to you a lot. My art teacher is always talking to us, telling us stories and things ... I like my P.E. and art teachers. They can joke around and they have more excitement, they're not serious all the time."

When Mike has a problem he says he goes to his friends and his friend's grandmother, "My friends. Probably my best friend's grandma, she lives right up the street. I just go over there and talk to her." He admires his best friend's brother, "He's good at everything and I just try to be like him."

Mike seems to be doing well because he has sufficient support from teachers and others, and because he is involved and goal-oriented.

Lisa

Lisa is in third grade. She comes from a low socioeconomic background. She was abused by her father and at one time was homeless. Her step-sister is 14 and has a baby. Lisa has had, in the past, poor attendance and health problems. She lives with her mother, who works a lot. Yet Lisa is doing well in school. She gets mostly Bs and Cs and has a positive attitude about school.

Lisa has a clear goal, "I want to go to college and be a teacher... I want to teach first graders."

She likes teachers who "make things fun for you ... they try to make them funner than other teachers." Her friend has been especially helpful to her - "if I don't know a problem, she'll help me.

Lisa seems to realize the importance of personal responsibility. When asked why she thinks some students don't do well in school she replied, "Maybe they don't study enough or maybe they don't try enough. Maybe they should try harder to do what they want to accomplish. Maybe they're more interested in playing than doing their homework and studying ... they don't think they can do it so they just give up and won't do it." She also sees the importance of someone spending extra time with students who are having trouble: "Maybe they could get a tutor, someone to come over and spend maybe an hour or so with them, and just do that one subject or any subject they can't do ... Some teachers will go to the houses to spend time with them on the subject they are bad at."

Lisa has a support system in her neighborhood and is active in church. She rakes leaves for money, "they have helped with a way to earn money to get things ... I try to earn enough money so that I can get something for my mom ... I took her out to Western

Sizzlin and paid her dinner." Lisa is very close to her mother, "I really admire my mom. I think I admire her most of all ... I wonder how she can get her studying done after cooking, going to work, and still have time for us, and still have time to go to the mall or the shopping place or the beach or somewhere."

Lisa is not at risk academically. She lives in a environment that provides positive expectations and support through trusting relationships with adults.

Paul

Paul is an average size 11 year old likable student who is in his last year of elementary school. He is a student with learning disabilities who divides his school day between regular and special education resource room programs. Although one of the concomitant problems of Paul's learning disability has been difficulty with interpersonal and peer relations he has shown marked progress in this area. Now in his fifth grade year he has been chosen as a "friendly helper" due to his friendliness and sensitivity.

Paul has two brothers and lives in a middle class neighborhood close to his school. Paul laconically describes the kids and the adults in the neighborhood as being "nice and that's it". His nickname is Thompson, and he is very proud of that. Another source of pride is having his own room.

When asked to describe himself Paul remarked, "I run good. I have strong leg muscles because I run around a lot." In his spare time Paul likes to play baseball, swim, draw, "read all kinds of books", and listen to the radio. He especially likes to watch television. He watches the cartoons on Nickelodeon and likes Bart Simpson because "he's funny, and he cusses a lot".

Paul likes school because he has "a nice teacher and the playground is big". Actually Paul has two teachers. He likes both because they are nice, but one is also "funny". This year he thinks he is doing very well. "I am good in math and okay in social studies,

spelling, and reading. I'm good because I try hard, study, and get good grades." Paul attributes some of this success to his two teachers. He observes "If I have trouble they help me go around. They tell me to try hard and to study, and I'll get good grades." Credit also goes to his parents who help him with his homework. Paul is well aware of the consequences of not doing well in school. "I wouldn't want to get bad grades. If I did I would flunk".

Paul has advice for those children who do not do well in school. Going on the assumption that they do not do well because "they don't try hard and don't like to put forth the effort to do well in school", Paul believes that "kids should work as hard as they can". In addition, he thinks "if you keep up the effort then you will do well". But this philosophy is predicated on "teaching the kids how to do it, and they could do better at it."

When Paul has problems in school he feels comfortable about going to his teachers for help. He also knows that he can go to his parents for help. At times, however, he tries to deal with things himself. When he is mad he jogs or expends a lot of energy in physical activity.

Arnold Schwartznegger is Paul's role model because "he's strong". He has seen most of his movies. This fits with one of Paul's wishes. He would like to be a better runner "so he can outrun his friends and show-off."

Lakeesha

Lakeesha is an eleven year-old who is in the fifth grade at an urban elementary school. The school is located in the same public housing project where Lakeesha lives with her mother, sister, and two brothers. Her father lives across town, and she sees him occasionally. Although she failed second grade because of excessive absences from school, she is doing quite well in her fifth grade class this year and looks forward to going on to middle school next year.

Lakeesha is a small child in stature and very quiet, shy, and reticent. She could easily become "lost" in the classroom because she causes no trouble and tends to fade into the background. However, she has had some sensitive, responsive teachers who have recognized her potential for success and have made special efforts to help her.

When asked who her favorite teachers are, Lakeesha names Mrs. _____, her first grade teacher, Mrs. _____, her fourth grade teacher, and Mr. _____, her current teacher in the fifth grade. She said Mrs. _____ had been very nice to her and paid for her to go on a class field trip when her mother could not afford it. Mrs. _____ had also been very nice to her by giving her some clothes. She said that in fourth grade, some of the children had been making fun of the way she dressed, and Mrs. _____ had quietly given her several articles of nice clothing. In fact, she smiled and proudly announced, "Mrs. ___ gave me this skirt and sweater I am wearing today." Lakeesha likes Mr. _____ because "he is a good teacher and does Science experiments and fun things like that." He also spends extra time helping her with her schoolwork, especially Math which is her toughest subject.

Lakeesha thinks that some students do not do well in school because "their parents put them down and tell them that they're nothing." Some students do not do well because "they do what the group does and will act up in school." Others skip school and miss too many days. She would advise these students to "keep your hopes up and do things you know are right." She thinks that schools should provide tutors for children who need

help and have after school programs for them. She believes that she is now doing well in school because she has stopped fighting the children who tease her about her clothes and other things. She says, "I mind my own business and do my own work."

When Lakeesha has a problem to solve, she knows she can talk to her mother or to Mrs. Smith, both of whom give her good advice. When people pick on her, she turns to her older brother who offers her protection and to her best friend Chandra who understands her.

Lakeesha participates in several extracurricular activities. At home, she likes to play ballgames and Nintendo with her siblings and her friends. She helps to clean her house and proudly said, "I can cook a whole meal for my family." In addition, she attends church regularly and belongs to the Children's Choir. She hopes to become a junior deaconess someday soon. She also belongs to an African dance troupe that performs at various recreation centers in the area.

When asked what three things she wished for, Lakeesha answered:

1. "To pass fifth grade and go on to Middle School."
2. "My mom would have enough money to buy a lot of groceries for the month. Sometimes we run out of food."
3. "To be a teacher, a Headstart teacher."

Connie

Connie is an eighteen year old young woman in the eleventh grade of a rural/suburban high school. On the surface, Connie does not appear to be a typical "at-risk" student. She lives at home with both parents and her ten year-old brother. Her family is considered "very well-off" because her father owns a very successful business, and they live in a beautiful, large house situated on 20 acres of land. The family raises horses, and Connie has been riding since she was very young. Connie wears the most fashionable clothes and drives a late-model sports car.

Yet, Connie candidly admits that her family is dysfunctional because both of her parents are alcoholic. When her mother drinks, her mother becomes withdrawn, depressed, and non-supportive. When her father drinks, he becomes mean, violent, and abusive and will often beat Connie, her mother, and her little brother. In the past, Connie has responded to her family situation by doing poorly in school. Last year, she failed eight subjects and had to repeat the 11th grade.

However, two events have recently occurred that have helped her to "turn my life around." First of all, she fell in love with Josh who is captain of the basketball team and president of the senior class. Josh also has an excellent academic record and has been offered several college scholarships. He is very supportive of Connie and encourages her to do well in school. However, he is of a different race, and this has caused additional friction with Connie's father. The second event was that the last time her father started to beat his family, Connie called the police and had him arrested. She did it because she was afraid for her little brother. She said that taking a stand like that gave her a sense of worth and made her realize that she did have some control over her life. She said her father is "trying to do better now."

Because of these two events, Connie is doing quite well in school this year. She is going to both day and night school in an effort to catch up. She says "I am trying harder in everything. Last year, I never did my work." When asked who her favorite teachers are, she named Mrs. _____, her English teacher, and Mrs. _____, her History teacher. Mrs. _____ is also the yearbook director, and Connie greatly enjoys working on the yearbook. Mrs. _____ is "very supportive, gives good advice, doesn't give false hopes, but is very encouraging." Connie says, "Mrs. _____ holds me together academically and helps to pull me through the bad times."

When asked why she though some students do not do well in school, she replied, "There are many different things it could be. For me it was my home life. Some students have no motivation from their parents and no encouragement to do well. A lot of it can be the

people you hang around. Some students play and joke around in class and get themselves in trouble." She would advise students who do not do well to "get involved in extracurricular activities, join something; pick up a hobby; play a sport; study more; anything besides just going home and getting in trouble." She thinks that teachers can help these students more by staying after school to tutor them.

Connie, herself, is involved in extracurricular activities. In addition to riding her horses, she runs track and plays tennis. She also goes to church with her grandparents whenever she can. She especially admires her boyfriend Josh who "helped me to wake up." She feels that he is a great role model because he is always trying to better himself. Because of him, she feels motivated to finish high school and go on to college. She would like to attend the same college he does.

When asked about her three wishes, she responded:

1. "To have good health."
2. "To have financial security."
3. "Happiness in relationships with my family and my boyfriend."

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study suggest implications which will be of interest to researchers, educators, and other concerned citizens as they search for ways to improve educational opportunities for at-risk students. These implications can be addressed in response to key research questions.

Key Question 1: Why have these children succeeded when others with similar characteristics have not?

Summary of Findings: The children in this study may be labeled "at-risk" because they have many of the characteristics of students who are in danger of dropping out of school due to academic failure or other problems. These children have been victims of the effects of such problems as unemployment, divorce, poverty, abuse, missing parents, and teenage pregnancy. While most children succumb to the effects of such devastating problems, a small percentage manage to defy the odds and survive.

These survivors are labeled "resilient" because they have developed characteristics and coping skills which enable them to succeed. They are able to recover from or adapt to the effects of devastating problems. They appear to have developed a sense of self-efficacy and an internal locus of control that enable them to succeed when others do not. They also appear to have protective mechanisms that operate at key points in their lives that help them to be resilient.

According to Winfield (1991), educators and policy makers must identify and foster the protective mechanisms which develop resilient children. The protective mechanisms may be divided into four categories. The first category serves to reduce negative outcomes of problems by altering the child's exposure to the risk. An example is that preschool experiences may reduce a disadvantaged child's risk of failure in kindergarten or first grade. A second category of protective

mechanisms reduces the negative reactions that follow exposure to a risk. An example is that the risk of failure for teenage mothers is diminished when the adolescent can receive prenatal care, education, and other services. A third category is the establishment and maintenance of self-efficacy and self-esteem. An example is that a systematic program of praise and recognition in the schools can build at-risk children's self-esteem and lead to improvement in academic motivation. Finally, a fourth category of protective mechanisms is the provision of opportunities for at-risk children to receive the skills necessary for school and career success. An example is that adequate counseling and involvement in extracurricular activities gives students additional means for attaining knowledge and skills. [A description of the four mechanisms also appears in CDS, July, 1992.]

Implications: In order to reduce the number of at-risk children, while increasing the number of resilient ones, educators must develop on-going processes and programs that foster the four protective mechanisms. These problems should address early childhood educational experiences (Trachtman, 1991) and issues related to adolescent childbearing (Scott-Jones, 1991), and other problems which can cause a temporary cessation of schooling. One adolescent mother, who was interviewed for this study, reported that her high school offered a support group for students who had babies. She said that meeting weekly with six other teenage mothers gave her tremendous feelings of comfort and affirmation and encouraged her to complete her education.

Programs should also address the development and building of student self-esteem (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989) and the provision of counseling techniques which have contact with all parts of an at-risk student's life (Nevetsky, 1991). The strengths and abilities of at-risk students can be enhanced and expanded by the careful development of such programs.

Key Question 2: What was the locus of control for these children? What did they do for themselves, and what is their perception about what others did for them?

Summary of Findings: Individuals with an internal locus of control attribute success to their own abilities or efforts, while those with external locus of control attribute success to luck or factors beyond their control. For people with internal locus of control success is reinforcing because it confirms that their efforts or abilities have paid off. Conversely, for people with external locus of control, effort or ability has no relationship to success. There is no reason to exert much effort if everything is a matter of chance (Savage, 1991).

Clearly, the children in this study possessed an internal locus of control. They assumed personal responsibility for their successes and failures and had a strong sense of self-efficacy. They felt they were successful because they had chosen to be successful and had put forth needed effort. Even though they welcomed and appreciated the efforts of the significant adults in their lives, they did not see these people as being responsible for success or failure. They credited themselves. They believed that failing students were not putting forth enough effort. Peng, et al. (1992) supports this notion by suggesting that many students who fail have an external locus of control and blame others and events outside of themselves for their failure.

Implications: Instructional strategies and techniques must be developed that will promote a sense of internal locus of control. Resilient students have spoken of satisfaction gained from experiencing success in self-fulfilling activities. These activities also increase the motivation to achieve. Savage (1991) suggests that at-risk students need to have visible and concrete displays of success in order for them to see the progress that has been made. Teachers should establish reference points where achievement will be identified, and they must continually relate success to effort and ability.

Key Question 3: What is the perspective of these resilient children toward school activities?

Summary of Findings: In general, resilient students seem to like school. Most attempt to involve themselves in classroom discussions and activities and try to achieve in academic areas. They are also involved in extracurricular activities which give them another source of support. In addition, extracurricular activities seem to lessen the peer pressure among at-risk students to not to do well in school. Resilient students want to fit in with their peers while continuing to achieve academically. Engaging in extracurricular activities, especially sports, gives them a means for achieving this. Involvement in both academic and extracurricular activities maintains the resilient at-risk students' positive engagement in school (Geary, 1988).

A recent study indicates that sports participation is positively associated with at-risk African American eighth-grade males' aspirations to enroll in academic or college-preparatory programs in high school, to have definite plans to complete high school, and to attend college. There were positive links between athletic participation and pro-academic behaviors and attitudes. Athletes presented fewer discipline problems, looked forward to their academic classes, and were perceived by their teachers as giving full effort to their class work. Participation in athletics can have a positive impact on at-risk students' motivation and engagement in traditional academic norms and behaviors (Braddock, Royster, Winfield & Hawkins, 1991). This phenomena may also apply to other at-risk males.

Most of the students in the current study also seemed to enjoy school. The younger children seemed to have a more favorable attitude than the older ones. The younger children found school to be fun and looked forward to going there each day, while older children tended to have a neutral attitude toward school and viewed it as a necessity if they were going to have a better life. However, nearly

all of the children agreed that extracurricular activities were very important. Most of them were involved in clubs, church activities, hobbies, and sports. Many of the older children held jobs after school but also found time for other extracurricular activities. As previously mentioned, involvement in activities provides resilient students with the extra support and encouragement they need.

Implications: Educators need to ensure a positive, inviting school environment for at-risk students because a positive climate seems to cause students to stay in school. Teachers need to be trained and encouraged to provide classroom activities and classroom environments that stress academic achievement while also building students' self-esteem and self-confidence. The classroom environment should facilitate time-on-task, student interaction, student success, and positive reinforcement for desired classroom behaviors. Positive experiences in school and classroom activities gave the resilient students a sense of belonging, bonding, and encouragement.

In addition, extracurricular activities need to be expanded and greatly promoted in schools where there are large populations of at-risk students. As previously mentioned, these activities seem to increase involvement and membership in school. However, many at-risk students will not voluntarily participate in activities because of their general feelings of disconnectedness. Teachers and administrators must develop needed programs and systematically issue personal invitations for at-risk students to join. These programs should include the usual school clubs such as drama, choir, "Future Teachers", "Future Farmers", and others. They should also include support groups for various concerns such as adolescent mothers, victims of abuse, children of alcoholic parents, children of incarcerated parents, and others.

Finally, involvement in athletics as an educational tool to enhance academic resilience and attachment for males should not be ignored. Activities associated

with sports should be expanded to allow both athletes and non-athletes more opportunities to experience academic benefits. Braddock et al. (1991) suggest that both players and non-players could write contributions to sports columns in order to enhance writing and language skills and collect and analyze player statistics to enhance mathematical skills. Sports could be incorporated into the English, mathematics, science, and social studies programs of elementary, middle, and secondary schools. Older students may also be interested in participating in sports debate teams and sports enthusiast clubs. These activities combine students' existing interests with academics.

Key Question 4: What is the perspective of these resilient children toward teachers and teaching practices?

Summary of Findings: Several studies indicate that teachers play tremendously important roles in the success of resilient children. These children often speak about individual teachers who have taken a personal interest in them and have been important to their success. Resilient children say that they most appreciate teachers who have the ability to care about them, treat them with respect, get along with them, listen to them, take them seriously, and provide them with encouragement. They also appreciate teachers who are fair when instructing and grading and who are able to increase the students' individual learning by understanding them both personally and academically. Minority children want teachers who understand their minority group membership, treat them equally to majority group members, and help to instill pride in their cultural heritage (Coburn & Nelson, 1989).

Likewise, the resilient children in the current study also indicated that teachers, administrators, and counselors greatly contributed to their success. The term they most often used to describe these people was "nice". The "nice" adults seemed to go above and beyond the call of duty. They spent time with the students and

seemed to genuinely care about them. One student talked about a teacher who persisted in calling her at home asking her to come to school. She credits this individual teacher with renewing her interest in school and helping her to become a high school senior.

These students also liked teaching practices which actively involved them and which made learning pleasurable. They spoke about teachers who made math or science or social studies "fun". They also spoke about teachers who took the time to explain difficult content to them. These teachers were viewed as being supportive and contributing to student success.

Implications: Teachers need to be provided with training and encouragement to develop the attitudes and behaviors that are of most benefit to at-risk children. These students need teachers who are respectful, caring, honest, patient, open-minded, and firm. They also need teachers who understand learning styles, expect positive results, and recognize cultural norms and differences. Perhaps teacher education programs for preservice and inservice teachers need to offer special seminars or classes on working with at-risk populations.

Nelson-LeGall and Jones (1991) suggested that teaching activities need to be utilized that will encourage "help seeking" as an adaptive skill for coping with the academic stress of many at-risk students. These students will often continue to work unsuccessfully on a task without help despite the availability of more productive strategies. Perhaps they are forestalling judgments of failure. Instead, they need to be taught that there are times when help-seeking can provide solution to problems that will ensure success. Help-seeking can then be regarded as a sign of motivation because the students are actively using available human resources when they need them. Resilient students are able to do this, unlike most at-risk students. They need to be taught to ask for and seek help when their own independent efforts have failed. They need to understand the costs of not

seeking help and be assured that learning in the classroom is not merely an individual endeavor but is supported by adults and other students in the classroom. Resilient students seem to understand this.

One approach to ensuring more success for at-risk students and the development of help-seeking behaviors is the use of cooperative learning approaches. Savage (1991) explains that cooperative learning addresses the needs for power, inclusion, belonging, and fun in the classroom. Positive group dynamics can result, and learner satisfaction with the class can increase. Cooperative learning approaches facilitate the achievement of important educational outcomes. They lead to "higher achievement, greater interpersonal relations among students, more positive attitudes toward the subject studied, and a stronger belief that one is liked and supported by other students" (p. 117). These findings appear to be consistent across grade levels. These findings are certainly desirable for at-risk children and should help them to become more resilient.

Finally, the current use in many middle schools of advisor-advisee groups would seem to be an approach that would help at-risk students develop close relationships with teachers and other adults.

Key Question 5: Are there specific factors or variables that are common for resilient children?

Summary of Findings: Resilient students tend to have personality traits and temperamental characteristics that help them to become individuals with sound values, high self-esteem, healthy interpersonal relationships, success in school, and plans for the future. These traits often begin in early childhood and are rewarded with helpful reactions from those around them. This causes these students to view the world as a positive place despite the difficult conditions with which they must cope.

Resilient children also tend to have high intrinsic motivation and internal locus of control. They are actively involved in extracurricular events at school and in the community. Werner (1984) and Phillibar (1986) suggest that "required helpfulness" is an important factor in the lives of resilient students. Volunteer work in the community, helping a buddy at school, and taking care of siblings at home are examples of "required helpfulness." These acts seem to lend purpose to the difficult life of an at-risk student and provide opportunities to care about and help fellow human beings.

The factors and variables that are common for the resilient children in the current study were synthesized into six major themes: activities, personality, school, home and neighborhood, and help from others. The results indicated that these children were much like the ones mentioned in the literature. They were involved in a variety of meaningful activities, both in and out of school. They were able to articulate clear and specific goals and appeared to be highly motivated and optimistic about the future. They seemed to have internal locus of control, a sense of personal responsibility for their accomplishments and failures, and high self-esteem.

Most of the students liked school and believed that teachers and other significant adults had contributed to their success. They came from dysfunctional homes but were able to overcome the distractions and do well in school. They recognized that other people could help them, and they were not afraid to ask for help when they needed it. Many of them were also involved in "required helpfulness." One middle school boy talked proudly about helping his grandfather work on old cars, and a fourth grade girl boasted about being able to cook dinner for her siblings.

Implications: Specific, systematic and enduring programs need to be developed that will help at-risk children become resilient. The major goals of the programs should be related to the development and nurturing of the factors and variables that are

common among resilient students and should address the implications previously cited. In addition, the programs should span the grades from kindergarten to twelve, with an emphasis on early childhood intervention. The programs should encourage parental involvement and should provide opportunities for parent education.

Finally, researchers, educators, and other concerned citizens must understand that resilient students are a product of a series of complex processes involving school environment, family support, and individual attributes. Therefore, any programs developed for them must address complex concerns and issues and offer multifaceted solutions and alternatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The results of this study, when integrated with other research on at-risk students, suggest several recommendations that will translate the findings into meaningful action to enhance the success of at-risk students.

Information-Based Decision-Making

Teachers, counselors, and administrators need to be knowledgeable about the characteristics of at-risk students and the factors that affect the success of at-risk students. It is important for school personnel to realize that "at-risk" is a term that describes an internal set of beliefs and attitudes, not a description of demographic characteristics. In-service days or other workshops for staff development could be used to present the findings of this research and discuss what schools can do to make sure that important factors are included as part of the experience of every student (e.g., teachers and administrators could "judge" themselves according to the interpersonal factors that were found to be influential; the important role of the teacher in providing a support system through positive relationships).

Planning and Evaluation

The findings can be used to plan and evaluate programs that are targeted to help at-risk students, at both the division and school level. The results can constitute a checklist of components or principles that should be included in planning or setting up a new program. Existing programs can be reviewed to determine the extent to which the findings undergird the program (e.g., do existing programs, such as Comer, include the findings from this study?). Grant proposals can include the principles and/or the model to demonstrate a systematic, research-based approach that is targeted to important factors. School renewal teams can use the results in developing school goals and programs that will address the needs of at-risk students.

Personnel Selection and Evaluation

The results can be used in the selection and evaluation of school personnel. Teacher and administrator candidates can be evaluated on the basis of their knowledge and sensitivity to the factors that affect the success of at-risk students (e.g., do they realize that "positive expectations" means a belief that students can achieve, not simply setting high standards for students; do they understand the importance of developing internal attributions; will they be caring toward students and take time to relate meaningfully to students?; how do they feel about co-curricular activities?). The criteria for the selection and job descriptions of teachers and administrators can be reviewed to determine the extent to which the findings from this study are included (e.g., interview questions and evaluation checklists for new applicants). Criteria and procedures for evaluating the performance of teachers and administrators can be reviewed to be certain that they include the findings from this study (e.g., the evaluation form).

Pre-Service and In-Service Education

Pre-service teacher education and counselor education programs can use these results to sensitize teachers and counselors to the characteristics of at-risk students, and what it takes to help these students succeed. College and university programs for teachers and counselors can be reviewed to determine the extent to which these findings are

included (e.g., in coursework and student teaching). In-service programs for teachers and counselors can use these results to raise awareness and understanding of how at-risk students can be helped. The video show that summarizes the results can be utilized; the profiles of resilient students reviewed; the model can be applied to teaching and counseling; the implications and recommendations can be operationalized.

APPENDIX A

Interview Form and Protocol

Interview Form

MERC Study of Resilient At-Risk Students

Name of Student: _____ Date: _____

Interviewer: _____ Place: _____

PART 1: Establish an open, warm, comfortable atmosphere and relationship with the student by telling the student about the study and asking "easy" questions.

Tell the student that the purpose of the study is to find out about them and how they feel about school and other things - that the focus is on their opinions. Stress that this is not a test; there are no right or wrong answers, and that everything they say will be confidential. None of their teachers or anyone else in the school will know about what they say.

Begin the questions with something like "Tell me about yourself."

PROBES: What do you like most?

What are your hobbies/interests?

How do you spend your spare time?

What do you hope to do someday after you complete school/your education?

PART 2: Focus on questions related to school and learning. What school-related factors have contributed to their success?

PROBES: Tell me what is it like going to school here?

What teachers do you like best in this school? (Now or in the past) Why?

How are you doing in school? What subjects are you good at? Why do you think you are good at these subjects?

Is there anything that gives you trouble in school? What do you do about it?

Who in the school has been particularly helpful to you? In what ways have they been helpful?

Do you like some teachers better than others? Why?

Why do you think some students do not do well in school?

What advice do you have for the students who do not do well in school?

What could schools and teachers do to help students do better in school?

PART 3: Questions about their neighborhood and home. The intent is to learn about neighborhood and home influences on their academic success.

PROBES: Where do you live? What's it like living there?

What is your neighborhood like? (e.g., setting, the kids who live there)

Is there anything about your home or neighborhood that has helped you in school?

PART 4: Questions concerning help from others.

PROBES: When you have a problem to solve, who do you go to for help? Why?

Are there any special programs or activities that you especially like?

Who do you especially like or admire? Why? What is it about him or her, specifically, that you like?

If you had three wishes, what would they be? Why?

INTERVIEWER COMMENTS:

MERC
At-Risk Study Team

Interview Protocol

Each interviewer is expected to follow the interview guide, with adaptations as necessary to achieve the goal of the interview: **From the student's point of view, what has contributed to their success?**

This is a qualitative, semi-structured interview. The following general guidelines will help assure standardization and validity.

1. An important part of the interview is **establishing a relationship with the student, getting to know each other, and putting the student at ease**. This is best accomplished by being in a private, informal setting, dressing "down", and by engaging in small talk, "chit-chat" in the beginning.

2. Early in the interview inform the student of the purpose of the study, and make assurances that what is said in the interview will be treated confidentially. Impress upon the student the importance of their being as honest as they can.

3. Follow the interview guide, but feel free to pursue a wider range of topics or "jump" back and forth to different sections.

4. Let the student shape the content of the interview. **When the student cannot tell his or her story personally, in his or her own words, the interview is no longer qualitative.**

5. Communicate personal interest and attention by nodding head and using verbal and nonverbal messages that show approval.

6. Ask for clarification when necessary, using phrases such as "What do you mean," "I'm not sure I'm following you," "could you explain that?"

7. Probe to allow greater specificity and examples. For example, in thinking about the past, ask the student to think back to that time and try to relive it. Students may have a tendency to offer a quick run-through of events, and you may need to dig for more detail.

8. Avoid questions that can be answered by "yes" or "no." Ask "Tell me about what you are like as a student," **not** "Are you a good student?"

9. Silence is fine - try not to interrupt, suggest answers, or change the direction of the conversation. An "I don't know" or "I'm not sure" response is a way to think about something more. Tell the student to "take their time."

10. Listen carefully, to both verbal and nonverbal.

11. Do not be evaluative in any way - except positively when appropriate.

12. Tape record the interview with the permission of the student. Keep the recorder unobtrusive.

13. Take brief notes during the interview. Keep talking while you write (not ask, listen to answer, then write, then ask again). Keep eye contact and write unobtrusively. Immediately after the interview fill in the interview guide with more detailed notes and observations. Try to record as closely as possible to the words used by the student.

13. Check over the interview guide **before** ending the interview to be sure all important questions were asked.

APPENDIX B

Coded Transcript of 8th Grade Female Interview

Coded Transcript of 8th Grade Female Interview

Interviewer: This will probably take a half hour or so, as long as you want to take is how long it will take, how about that.

Before we get into specific questions about school I'd like for you, if you would, tell me a little bit about yourself, maybe from the point of view of things you like, your hobbies, what you do in your spare time.

Student: I mainly hang out with my friends in my spare time. I go skating on Friday night and Saturday night. I don't know - I used to be a trouble maker, get in a lot of trouble, but, I decided to get myself straight. Now I'm getting Bs and Cs in school. I used to get straight Fs, but, I kind of turned myself around, since I got tired of it, tired of getting in trouble. That's just about it. (1) (18) (20)

Interviewer: Have you thought, I know this is still a little ways off, but after you finish high school have you thought about what you might want to do.

Student: I don't know. Not really you know. It's not clicked yet. (2)

Interviewer: Could you tell me what it's like going to school here?

Student: Oh, it's fun. Teachers here are nice and some of them can be mean, but if you're nice to them, they're nice to you and principals are real nice. They seem to care a lot. Some of the students here need. . . seem to need to be in a mental hospital. Other than that they're okay. You know, some of them are kind of weird. (3)

Interviewer: Do you have any teacher or teachers that you like the best?

Student: Yeah, the class that I was just in, Ms. _____. . .

Interviewer: How come?

Student: She, I don't know - she treats me like, she doesn't treat me like my parent, she treats me like I'm her friend. She doesn't treat me like a student, she treats me like a friend. (4)

Interviewer: What does she teach?

Student: Social Studies. I like Mr. _____, he's one of the assistant principals.

Interviewer: When you say she teaches, she treats you like a friend as opposed to a parent, give me an example.

Student: It's not like the rest of the teachers. The rest of the teachers say "here, you're in my class to learn. You're not in here to have a good time." She doesn't have it that way. She wants to be a friend and wants to be a teacher to her students. She wants you to feel like you can come to her whenever you need somebody or something. I just think she is really nice. I come into her study hall just about every day and talk to her, cause I don't have anything else to do in study hall, so I come in and talk to her, help her clean up the room and help her grade papers and stuff. We talk about a lot of things. She's really nice, she's like a best friend to me, to tell you the truth.

Interviewer: Did you know her before this year?

Student: No.

Interviewer: You mentioned your grades - how are you doing in school?

Student: A whole lot better. Last year I was here in the same grade. I failed because I was goofing around - I got straight Fs. I kind of got tired of it, tired of getting in trouble all the time. At the beginning of this year I was the same way, I was kicked out three times for having cigarettes and then I said "No," because if I was kicked out again I would get expelled. I said I can't do that. I just flipped all around. I was getting Fs at the beginning of the year and now I'm getting on my interim 4 Cs and 2 Bs. I just got tired of getting in trouble and listening to everybody say, "You shouldn't do that. You're too old to do that."

Interviewer: Is there something you can pinpoint that caused you to get tired of that? Caused you to change? Did you just wake up one day?

Student: I don't know. Not too long ago my grandmother died and before she died she told me "If I die, I want you to do real good, and I told your grandfather I have something for you if you do real good, cause I won't be here to give it to you. I'm going to give it to him to give to you if you do real good." She said "Just do good for me." That just kind of clicked - it made me want to impress her.

Interviewer: What is your favorite subject?

Student: My favorite subject is math.

Interviewer: Why do you think you are good in math?

Student: Math is kind of hard, but when you get into it, try it and get it right, than I know what it is about.

Interviewer: That makes you feel like you have accomplished something?

Student: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is there anything about school or in school that gives you trouble?

Student. Yeah - friends. They always want you to get in trouble with them. I don't need that. I want friends that can keep you out of trouble instead of trying to get you in trouble, but it's mainly friends. (7)

Interviewer: What, if anything, do you do about it or do you think you can do about it?

Student. I just tell them to leave me alone. I've got things to do. I've got to pass this year. I'm going to high school. I tell them I've got better things to do than get in trouble. (2)

Interviewer: You mentioned Ms. _____-can you tell me a little about who in school has been particularly helpful to you and maybe how?

Student: To me, the principals, because when I kept getting into so much trouble they kept on telling me "It's not worth it. You don't need to because you have to face it when you get a job." I think that kind of helped me because they knew what they were talking about because they are the principals and they are used to telling kids this. So I think it was mainly the principals. (20)

Interviewer: You talked about why you like Ms. _____, because not only did she expect you to learn but she also wanted you to be able to come to her and talk to her, be your friend. Can you think of reasons other than that why some teachers are better than others?

Student: Because some teachers just feel like you're there to sit down and read and write and get it all straight. You're not in there to socialize. Ms. ____ wants you to have friends in the classroom. She wants you to be able to talk to your friends and she gives you time to talk to your friends. Other teachers tell you you're not in class to socialize, not in class to have a good time. I think that is why Ms. ____ and some other teachers are better than others. They want you to be able to have friends and socialize. (4)

Interviewer: They still expect you to learn?

Student: Yeah. But they want you to be able to have friends and be able to learn to socialize. (4)

Interviewer: Why do you think some kids don't do well in school?

Student: Because they don't care. I didn't care when I was getting in trouble. I was like "oh, well," but now I feel bad when I get a bad grade. I feel like I don't need to get into that again. I don't think they care. (9)

Interviewer: Do you have any ideas on how you can make kids care?

Student: When you're face to face with them and you tell them, they don't believe you but I think the only way is that you should tell them and let them experience doing good for a while then let them go back and do bad and then let them decide which one they feel better about. That's what I did. I tried this for a while to see how good I felt about myself.

Interviewer: From the school's point of view, if we could let them be successful a little bit so they have something to compare it to, do you think?

Student: Yeah. So they can compare being good to being bad and seeing which one they fell better about themselves with. That kind of clicked in my head.

Interviewer: Do you think the answer to that would be pretty easy to figure out?

Student: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you have any advice that you think is useful to students who aren't doing well in school? What they might do?

Student: Skip this one and come back to it.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little bit about the neighborhood you live in?

Student: It's a wonderful neighborhood - not many kids, a lot of older people in the neighborhood.

Interviewer: Where is it? Where do you live?

Student: It's on Statute Street over by the Courthouse. Not many people over there get in trouble because the cops are always down there. It's a pretty good neighborhood. A lot of kids there that don't understand they should stay out of trouble, but they always want to get in trouble. It's a good neighborhood because the cops keep them straight and if something goes wrong, just call the cops and they come right there. We don't really have much trouble in the neighborhood.

Interviewer: Do you think the kids that are in the neighborhood are pretty good?

Student: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is there anything about home or about the neighborhood you live in that you think has helped you in school?

Student: No. My mom and dad divorced when I was three. My mom lives in North Carolina. My dad works from 3 in the afternoon until 11 at night, so I know it's not in the home environment. It's not the neighborhood because there's not many kids that care about anything. All they care about is themselves. I think it's mainly the school environment. (12) (14)

Interviewer: When you have a problem that you need to try to figure out, who do you go to for help?

Student: My mom - my real mom. She lives in North Carolina. I usually call her, but she comes here every weekend. (12) (15)

Interviewer: Here at school, are there any special activities or programs that you particularly like?

Student: There haven't been any programs this year, but last year I was in a very good program. See, my dad is an alcoholic and we were in this group of a few kids and we talked about how our parents might want to stop drinking. It was on Tuesday and Thursday and lasted a whole period. It was fun. You got to learn about how your parents might feel about alcohol even though they are alcoholics. (0)

Interviewer: This was just for the kids?

Student: Yeah. My dad didn't even know about it.

Interviewer: Is that something the school sponsored?

Student: Yeah, and they have a divorce group where the parents are divorced and you go in there and talk about how, why your parents divorced, and how you feel about it. (0)

Interviewer: That was last year, too?

Student: I kind of got my act straight this year so I don't really need to go. I've been in all kinds of group things since the third grade so I kind of got used to it. I learned how to put up with it. I wasn't in anything this year. I think both groups are very good. (0)

Interviewer: They're still here? You just didn't feel like you needed to participate?

Student: I'm not sure if they're in here or not.

Interviewer: Of all the people that you know or that you see on TV or public figures, is there anybody that you admire, any one person?

Student: My sister - she was not the best teenager but she's 22 now and I spend every weekend with her because when my mom comes from North Carolina she stays with my sister in the house. My sister lives with my grandpa because ever since my grandma died he has been by himself. She's got a baby and a boyfriend, she's not married but she is an excellent person to look at and say "Hey, I want to be like that." When my grandma was alive, she took care of her. She fed her, she cooked for her. My grandma had lost both of her legs. My sister took care of all her needs. She was wonderful. She's the partying type, she likes to have a good time, but she really gets serious when she wants to. If she wants to get something done she doesn't give up. That's the way she is. She likes to do what she says she is going to do. I think I like my sister the best.

Interviewer: Does she work?

Student: No. She stays home and takes care of grandpa. At one time she was taking care of both grandpa and grandma. She takes care of her baby and her boyfriend. She's like the center of attention in the house. She's wonderful.

Interviewer: Back to the question skipped earlier. Do you have some advice or something to say to other kids that need to turn it around as to how they might turn it around? What do they need to do?

Student: They need to think about it, some of the good things they do and some of the bad things they do, and compare them. It's not worth it.

Interviewer: Last question - If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?

Student: That's so easy - Honor roll first, parents, and then college. I want to go to college.

Interviewer: If you went to college, what would you like to study?

Student: Psychology. I'm serious.

APPENDIX C

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